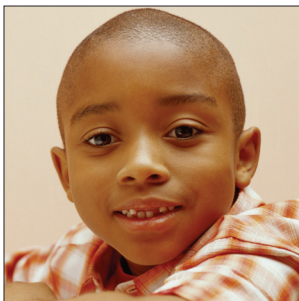


**CASE STUDY** WHY ARE A DISPROPORTIONATE NUMBER OF BLACK CHILDREN KILLED OR INJURED ON LONDON'S ROADS?  
**KAREN ROBERTS** LOOKS FOR ANSWERS

# SAFE FROM HARM?



**M**any of you will have seen the dramatic TV campaign from Transport for London (TfL) aimed at reducing the numbers of children and teenagers killed on London's roads. The campaign – strapline “Don't die before you've lived” – featured a series of young people on their way to fame and success, whose lives are cut short by road accidents.

In fact, the number of young pedestrian casualties has been in gradual decline since 1994, with a 45% reduction over the ten-year period to 2004.

However, just over 1,500 young people were involved in road accidents as pedestrians in London last year. Analysis shows that boys aged 11-14, children from low income households and ethnic minority children – particularly those from black African and black Caribbean backgrounds – are particularly at risk.

#### RISK FACTORS

Last summer, therefore, Connect Research was commissioned by TfL to investigate the possible factors which might be putting black child pedestrians at greater risk. Connect proposed a mixed

qualitative methodology, involving mini-focus groups with children at primary and secondary schools; full focus groups with parents; interviews with road safety experts; and ethnographic research in black African and black Caribbean households.

The ethnographic element of the study was conducted in association with Nick Leon of Naked Eye Research and was recommended to help the research team differentiate between child pedestrians' stated behaviour and their actual behaviour when out and about on the streets.

#### THE SAME STORY

In the mini-focus groups, Connect spoke to children between the ages of eight and 16, from across London and from black African, black Caribbean, south Asian and white British backgrounds. All were from C2DE households. All of the parents in the study, however, were black African or black Caribbean, with a mix of overseas-born and British-born respondents.

Connect did not find any differences between ethnic groups in terms of children's lifestyles and leisure interests, journeys to school, housing or

incidence of car ownership. It had been hypothesised that children with access to a garden might be less likely to play outside the home and therefore would be at lower risk of being involved in an accident. This was not borne out by the research.

#### OUT OF SIGHT

From the general discussion, however, a number of interesting themes emerged about the general physical environment in which children and young people are growing up today.

For example, there was a common view among parents and young people that London's roads were not designed with children in mind. Examples of poor road layout and poor road design were widespread. And both the families who were studied ethnographically used parks which were encircled by main roads; in one case, the park exit was located on a bend which made it very difficult for children to see oncoming traffic.

#### CROSS PURPOSES

Similarly, bus stops and crossings were said to be located for the benefit of shoppers and workers (that is, adults) rather than children. So, for example, children often said that there were no crossings sufficiently near their schools or their local haunts such as McDonalds. Where crossings were situated say, 150 yards out of their way, children admitted they were unlikely to use them. Parents and children also complained about the lack of youth centres and designated spaces for children. Play areas on estates were said to be disappearing, to make way for new housing and extra car parks. As a result, children felt they were being forced onto the streets to play.

#### ON THE ROAD

When discussing the specific topic of road safety, we did not find that black children had

different attitudes to risk or lower awareness of road safety rules. Children from all ethnic groups spontaneously agreed that road safety was important, although they did admit to breaking the rules from time to time.

Similarly, they were all able to quote the Green Cross Code and to repeat the instructions given to them by their parents and schools – for example, not to cross between parked cars. The children mainly picked up their road safety education from their parents and teachers, but TV advertising and programmes such as *Crimewatch*, *Balamory* and *Grange Hill* were also cited.

#### CLOTHING RISK

But the research did bring to light a number of possible risk factors which might be contributing to the higher casualty rate among black child pedestrians in London.

The first risk factor related to the clothing worn by young black people. One of the observations made by both the researchers and the ethnographers involved in this project was that black African and black Caribbean boys were more likely to wear baseball caps and jackets with hoods than children from other ethnic groups. Indeed, many of them wore both at once, even in the summer.

Although there has been a higher casualty rate among young black people for some years before hoodies became popular, this is likely to be a contributory factor because hoods and caps make it more difficult for the wearer to hear and see what is going on around them when crossing the road. There also appeared to be a strong preference for dark clothing among the boys interviewed, which would make them less visible when cycling or walking at night.

#### SAFETY IN NUMBERS

Personal safety issues were a second potential risk factor. Boys from all ethnic groups

described running away from rival gangs, avoiding fights and keeping out of the way of the police as everyday occurrences. However, these concerns were more common and more acute among those from ethnic minorities. The south Asian boys said they usually went around in large groups to avoid being attacked by other boys (although they also said large numbers were useful when playing team games like cricket and football in the park). The black African and black Caribbean boys were more worried about being stopped by the police. Clearly, in circumstances where speed of escape and self-defence are paramount, observing the Green Cross Code becomes less of a priority, which would seem to put ethnic minority boys in greater danger.

#### EXTENDED FAMILIES

Another possible factor was family size and spread. It was far more common for the black and Asian children in the study to come from a large family (of three or more children) and for their siblings to be spread over a wider area. In other words, it was not unusual in a black or Asian household for there to be an older teenager, a child in primary school and a toddler or baby. Black children are particularly over-represented in child pedestrian casualty statistics in the 11+ age group and the age spread of siblings links to higher accident risk in several ways.

#### SLEEP DEPRIVATION

First, parents will naturally tend to the younger members of the family first as they require more care and assistance. This may limit the amount of quality time parents spend with their eldest children who may sometimes be left to their own devices. Secondly, in families where very young children have been crying through the night, the older children are likely to have disturbed sleep, which may affect their mood and behaviour on the streets and affect their

concentration.

Thirdly, in larger households, the older children often spent a lot of time out of the home with their friends in order to have some time to themselves, away from household tasks and younger siblings. Clearly, this puts them at more risk than if they spent more time indoors. Finally, the older children in the family were often expected to take their younger siblings to or from school or out to play. They usually saw this as a chore rather than a serious responsibility and, as such, often did not give their full attention to the task. Teenagers – whether alone or in company – tended to send texts to their friends, chat on their mobiles and/or listen to music on their MP3 players while walking along the street. Add another distraction to the mix in the form of a young child running around and it is easy to imagine how older children might inadvertently cross the road without taking due care.

#### URBAN OUTFITTERS

Ultimately, young people and parents were keen for TV and radio campaigns to be reinforced by in-street reminders – on billboards, bus stop posters and public transport.

But Connect also felt it might be possible to engage young people through their interest in fashion, music and gaming. One suggestion was for TfL to work with an “urban” fashion designer to introduce a range of reflective clothing and headwear that it would be “cool” for young people – including those from black African and black Caribbean backgrounds – to wear. Overall, in fact, the study suggested that a multi-faceted approach would be necessary to reduce casualty rates, by using new channels to deliver the message and finding new ways of bringing the message alive for black children and teenagers.

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